R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 014 925 FL 000 604

THE ETERNAL DILEMMAS.

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PUB DATE 65

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.20 3P.

DESCRIPTORS- *AUDIOLINGUAL METHODS, *LEARNING THEORIES, *MODERN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM, *SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING, *LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION, AUDIOLINGUAL SKILLS, CONCEPT TEACHING, CONDITIONED RESPONSE, FLES, LANGUAGE SKILLS, LANGUAGE PROGRAMS, TEACHING METHODS, GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD,

THE AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE THAT CHARACTERIZE ALL DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS PERTAINING TO LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY ARE DERIVED FROM THE "DOUBLE NATURE" OF THE SUBJECT. TO COMPLICATE THE SITUATION FURTHER, THERE IS NO CERTAINTY THAT EITHER THE "CONDITIONED" OR "CONCEPTUAL" MODES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING REALLY COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER. THE DUAL NATURE OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING SUGGESTS RATHER THAT THE LANGUAGE TEACHER MUST LEARN TO COMPROMISE, TO MAKE THE BEST POSSIBLE DECISION, AND TO BALANCE OPPOSING POINTS OF VIEW IN A GIVEN SITUATION. DILEMMAS THAT WILL NOT DISAPPEAR ARE WHETHER TO (1) MEMORIZE DIALOGS AT THE EXPENSE OF LEARNING GRAMMAR RULES, (2) USE ENGLISH IN THE CLASS, (3) POSTPONE THE INTRODUCTION OF LITERATURE AND CULTURE TO THE HIGHER LEVELS, (4) TEACH ONLY AUDIOLINGUAL SKILLS AT THE BEGINNING LEVEL, (5) START LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE LOWER ELEMENTARY GRADES, AND (6) USE EXCLUSIVELY EITHER THE DIRECT OR INDIRECT METHODS. HOWEVER, WITH CONTINUED EXPERIENCE, RESEARCH, AND ANALYTIC UNDERSTANDING PROVIDED BY LINGUISTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE, THERE IS THE HOPE THAT THE PROFESSION WILL BETTER UNDERSTAND THE ALTERNATIVES AND MAKE WISER DECISIONS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE FLORIDA FL REPORTER," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2, WINTER 1965-66, PAGES 11-12,14. (AB)

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The following conversations between language teacher A and language teacher B are not real in the sense that they come from transcriptions of tape recordings of actual events. Yet they do resemble many conversations I have heard and they are typical of much of the "dialogue" which characterizes the discussions on teaching methodology.

Conversation 1:

A: I personally like the dialogue approach to teaching language. A dialogue memorized by the student gives a solid base with which to start. It provides a situational tie in, shows the student how language can be used. It provides a motivation for learning.

B: Especially in the beginning of the course, the dialogue will introduce many structures which are not familiar and which cannot be explained immediately. Thus the student will begin to wonder about grammatical explanation—be detracted from the learning experience. I prefer an approach which is not dominated by situations but by grammatical structures, in which elements of grammar are taught carefully in planned sequence.

A: I think such an approach would be quite boring, and . . .

B: I don't think it would have to be, and . . .

Conversation 2:

A: Obviously nobody can learn Spanish by listening to English or speaking English—but at the same time, I think I can use English in the class room quite profitably for various reasons. Only through the occasional use of English translation can I make sure that students really and completely understand. To give a quick English translation is often much more economical than an involved Spanish explanation of a word. When it comes to contrasting Spanish and English structures or sounds, of course, I must use English to make my point clear—and certainly, I could not possibly give explanations in Spanish, at least not at the beginning of the course . . .

B: I have heard all of these arguments and I am still unconvinced. My Spanish class is a cultural island — my students speak Spanish on that island, and only Spanish. As far as I am concerned, I represent the Hispanic culture and the Spanish language in the classroom. They are associated with me, as far as the pupils are concerned. This unique association would be seriously disturbed if I allowed myself to bring English into the class. As far as explaining in English is concerned, I do not think that explanations in the beginning of the course are that important. What is important is that my class does remain the linguistic island which demonstrates the importance and relevance of the language which I am teaching — and I certainly do not demonstrate this relevance if I begin to speak English whenever *real* and important communication, like explaining a grammatical point, takes place . . .

A: But if they do not understand . . .

B: I would rather be a few times misunderstood in Spanish than be understood in English, after all . . .

Conversation 3:

A: I think it is too bad that the business of acquiring basic language skills is so often confused with goals like providing cultural insights and sometimes even with the goal of introducing the pupil to literary materials at the earliest possible stage. Not that I have anything against culture or literature — but the student cannot understand literature until after he has mastered basic language skills. The literary materials which many teachers introduce in the early stages of the course are likely to contain a large amount of vocabulary and structure not yet mastered by the pupil. They upset the sequence of the course; they frustrate the pupil. Literary readings, or readings of cultural importance, belong to the higher levels of language instruction, not in the basic course.

B: I certainly agree, they *do* belong to the higher levels of instruction — but I am not convinced that this means that we should keep them out of the lower ones. For one thing, many of our students never reach the higher levels — and perhaps more of them would if the lower levels were to hold out some promise of what is to follow. Of course, if we fill the elementary levels entirely with fascinating conversations about the weather or how to order coffee in a restaurant, then we should not be surprised if the higher levels are reserved to the few who have not been driven away by boredom.

A: No reason why the pupils should be bored by elementary and basic language instruction. Maybe *you* are bored because you are a specialist in literature and . . .

B: I do not think so — but some literary material would certainly help to . . .

Conversation 4:

A: There can be no doubt that sound language teaching must be based on an audio-lingual approach and an extensive pre-reading period. The pre-reading period assumes that teacher and class alike establish sound audio-lingual approaches to learning. It drives home the point that — in language — speech and audio-lingual communication are the primary elements. It also allows for the formation of correct pronunciation without spelling pronunciations and the interference which comes from giving the French letters the familiar English pronunciation.

B: I read somewhere that at least one-third of all the pupils in a language class are likely to have visual modality preference—in other words, they are "visually minded". From the experience I have in my classes, the percentage might be even higher. All I know is that my pupils *want* to see something written. Many are eager to know the written forms and many need them to reinforce their memory. I know that I myself cannot remember anything unless I see it written out. As far as the interference from English orthography is concerned, this is a problem that must

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be met sooner or later anyway. Why not sooner?

A: Because a good pronunciation must be acquired first. Once it has been established, the English pronunciation of the letters will no longer interfere . . .

B: I do not see why the students cannot learn a good pronunciation as they learn to pronounce the letters . . .

Conversation 5:

A: I am convinced that the best age for beginning the study of a foreign language is in early childhood. Kindergarten perhaps. Children can learn languages more easily than adults. The fact that children exposed to different linguistic environments can learn two or more languages easily and without accent is the best proof of that. Besides, to learn a foreign language really well takes time. So the earlier we start, the better.

B: I certainly cannot dispute the last statement—but whether the well-known fact that multi-lingual environments will produce multi-lingual children can be applied to the school situation is a different matter. I should like to see the FLES program that has produced—or will ever produce—a true bilingual of the type that is produced through the informal and massive type of learning that takes place if the child is actually reared in an environment associated with a second language. Even if we had the teachers who could teach foreign languages in the elementary schools effectively, I am not convinced that FLES is the answer to our problems. It is probably true that children will learn the foreign language with better accents than adults. But isn't it also true that they learn very slowly? Some FLES programs cover in four years the amount of grammar and vocabulary which the high school or college student covers in a few months. The child's capacity to recognize grammatical construction, to conceptualize, to transfer, is not as well developed as the adult's. I do not see that language instruction at the elementary level is very economical.

A: Well, this is precisely the point. The child's ability to conceptualize is not as well developed as the adult's; but I think of this as an advantage. The ability to conceptualize and to form constructions by analogy with others is not an unambiguous blessing. You know very well that grown-ups use wrong analogies, analogies influenced by their native language just as often as they use right analogies. Children on the other hand . . .

B: Well, if the grown-ups use wrong analogies, then it is my job as a language teacher to keep them from doing so and to drill them for exactly the patterns at which such wrong analogies would occur. I still think that . . .

Conversation 6:

A: Perhaps the most important development in language teaching has been that we have finally recognized the difference between learning a language and learning about a language. Personally I am not sure that learning grammatical rules and telling the student about constructions do any good whatsoever. After all there is a lot of evidence showing that people can learn languages without ever learning any rules. My parents came from Europe when they were in their twenties. They still have their accents, but they (and with them many others) did learn to speak English quite fluently, and nobody ever gave them any grammatical explanations. On the other hand, we all know about thousands of students who receive instruction in grammar — without learning to speak the language they're supposed to be studying. The only thing you really know in a foreign language is what you drill and memorize. As for the rest . . .

B. Now, nobody can drill and memorize a language! Even in the native language, we learn to control a system of communication. We do not memorize all the utterances we are ever going to say. Controlling a system of communication means, ultimately, knowing the rules. By this I do not mean that a student must be able to verbalize about the rules of the language which he is using — but he must be able to utilize the rules to generate utterances . . .

A: I do not know what you mean by "generating utterances." Language is a set of habits — a series of responses learned in connection with certain stimuli. Once the responses have been properly overlearned, they can be transferred to other stimuli.

B. I think you are using a psychological approach which will never account for the immense complexity of language and language learning. Language is more than a set of responses acquired in connection with certain stimuli. It is a complex mechanism conditioned by the very fact that man has an innate capacity to acquire language. After all, animals can be conditioned to make certain responses but as far as I know they have not yet been taught to speak. Parrots do not really speak, you know, and one of your problems is that you would rather teach parrots than . . .

A: Come on, I didn't say that people had no specific capacity for language, but I merely . . .

* * *

I shall leave it to the reader to guess whether in the above conversations my ultimate sympathies were with teacher A or B. Actually this is comparatively unimportant. The point I want to make is that, in my opinion, *both* teachers A and B are fundamentally right — or at least a valid case could be made for either of the points of view expressed in the six conversations above. Ultimately, the reason for the "eternal dilemmas," the ambiguity and ambivalence of all discussions and recommendations concerning foreign language teaching lies perhaps in the very nature of the subject we are teaching. This "double nature" of language teaching and language learning has indeed been recognized by many leading pedagogues and been discussed under different names and different headings. Thus Professor Theodore Andersson ("On the Optimum Age for Beginning the Study of Modern Languages," *International Review of Education, VI,* 1960, 298-306) spoke of language learning as being a mixture of "conditioned" and of "conceptual" learning; and, attacking the problem from a somewhat different point of view, the great pioneer of scientific language teaching, Harold Palmer, stated many years ago (*The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages,* New York, 1917) that the speaking of a language involved the learning of "primary" and "second-

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ary" matter, primary matter being the raw material to be memorized, to be available upon recall, secondary matter being the utterances to be "manufactured" from the raw material by the understanding and application of the rules governing the linguistic system.

Depending on whether we stress the "conditioned" or the "conceptual" part of language learning, the acquisition of primary matter or the learning of the manufacturing process, we shall always arrive at different answers to the questions of language teaching. Moreover, to compound the problems of the language teacher, we cannot even say with certainty that the two basic modes of language learning really complement each other. There is a great deal of evidence to indicate that they oppose each other — at least with many mature adults. In other words, learning of and preoccupation with the rules of language can indeed get in the way of fluency and of acquistion of quick "conditioned" responses. Moreover, we all know that the learning of rules and grammar may represent a short cut — but at the same time we also know that fluency in the language can be achieved only if the pupil can express himself without thinking of the rules governing the language which he is using. Perhaps the most striking "dilemma" of the language teacher consists in the simple fact that he often teaches his pupils rules and awareness of grammatical construction in the hope that these pupils will eventually reach a fluency which will enable him to get along without the very rules which he has been taught.

The problems of language learning will not be solved by either teacher A or teacher B being proved "right" or "wrong". The dual nature of the subject rather suggests that the language teacher must learn to compromise, must learn to make the best possiible decision and to balance in the specific situation the opposing points of view in the best possible way. To use an analogy from a different discipline: I believe that a pedagogical decision must be made in terms of "economics" — seldom if ever can we be sure that a decision is an unqualified good. We can only hope that the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones. To memorize at the expense of learning rules, to use English in the class, to start language instruction in the lower grades — all these are decisions for which we must pay a price. There is always a negative aspect; but we can hope — and with the help of specific research make sure — that the price is worth the effort, that the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones. The basic dilemmas facing the language teacher will not be resolved and, to repeat again, I think it is futile to expect that *pro* and *contra*, *thesis* and *antithesis*, will ever disappear from a subject as complex as language and language teaching. But we can hope that with continued experience, research and analytic understanding provided by linguistic and psychological knowledge we shall better understand the alternatives facing us at each point and that we shall be able to make decisions and choices which will "maximize our profits."

THE FLORIDA FL REPORTER
Foreign Language Newsletter
ALFRED C. AARONS, Editor
Volume 4, No. 2 In Cooperation with the MLA FL Program Winter, 1965-1966